

PRESENTING AND OFFERING FEEDBACK ON COLLEAGUES' PAPERS¹

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All of us, regardless of discipline, give feedback and comment on other people's intellectual work. We all try to situate our own work in relationship to the ideas other people have had about issues we care about, which also requires that we accurately reflect on their prior work. This exercise should help us all become better at this crucial professional activity. We propose a simple three-step approach.

First, restate the paper. What does it say? Reflect as accurately as possible what the other author has said as you heard or read it. By itself, this can often be extremely helpful to the author, as it tells the author what came across to at least one other intelligent and attentive reader.

Second, identify the scholarly intervention. What is the main contribution of this piece to the existing literature? What appears to be the author's purpose in publishing this piece and why would/should others want to read it?

Third, offer constructive feedback. How can *the author's* project be improved, his or her intervention strengthened?

We purposely leave out a fourth element that is, unfortunately, common in reviews of other people's work – explaining what *you* would write, how *you* would intervene. That is crucial for your own work. Indeed, each of us begins our work by moving from what others are saying to what we wish to say. But this is only rarely helpful to another author.

The following outline should guide your discussion of your colleagues' work, and should inform how you respond to the work that will be presented by our visiting speakers in the course of the semester. Thinking about how others will respond to your work should also help you think about what makes a good, interesting project, and how to frame your own research.

¹ This set of guidelines was initially developed, with Karen Engle, for use at the Writing Workshops of the Institute for Global Law and Policy, Harvard Law School.

OUTLINE FOR COMMENTING ON A PAPER

Your presentation should approximate the format below:

a. Describe the paper and identify its central argument(s)/contribution(s)

- i. What appears to be the central issue/puzzle that the paper seeks to address?
How would you state the paper's central argument or thesis? (If you see more than one potential argument, articulate the various possibilities.)
- ii. How does the author develop the argument? (Offer a brief summary of the paper)
- iii. In what debates/discussions does it seek to intervene? Who is the author writing against? For?
- iv. How would the author complete the sentence: "Until now, everyone has thought (or didn't know) _____ but now we should think _____."

b. Identify the types of scholarly intervention (see page 3 for some types of interventions)

- i. What evidence/methods does the author use to support the claims made?
- ii. How does (should) the author explain the nature of his/her intervention?
- iii. How would you classify the type of intervention?

c. Offer constructive feedback (see page 4 for suggested types)

- i. Identify one or two broad areas in which the paper might be improved
- ii. What might it be helpful for the group to discuss to assist the author?

An Incomplete List of Types of Scholarly Interventions

Each contribution might be fit under one or more types of intervention, and might accomplish its purpose through one or more modes of argumentation. Below are very preliminary lists of types and modes – we expect you will identify others in the papers you discuss during the Workshop. Please use the blank lines below to extend the lists as you work through the papers in your section. Use the types and modes to describe the various papers in your section.

1. Proposing a new take on a well-established empirical claim, line of reasoning, or doctrine
2. Reorganizing or reinterpreting a doctrinal field
3. Critically mapping the literature or current debates on a topic
4. Intervening in a broad debate about social policy on the basis of new evidence, new methods, or a new approach
5. Intervening in a theoretical, jurisprudential or political debate on the basis of new evidence or a new approach
8. Retelling or unsettling a settled historical narrative: recovering possibilities that have been overlooked
9. Using historical retelling to challenge a discipline's basic assumptions
10. Critiquing a scholar with whom you are generally sympathetic – or more hostile – through a book or literature review
11. _____
12. _____
13. _____
14. _____
15. _____

You can accomplish these interventions through one or more kinds of approaches:

1. Uncovering problematic assumptions underlying particular theories, doctrines, policies
2. Highlighting unresolved gaps, conflicts and ambiguities in existing arguments or proposals
3. Focusing on structural biases and blind spots that existing approaches ignore
4. Bringing new (or old but forgotten) theories, theorists, personal narratives, empirical methods to bear on familiar problems
5. Presenting new data or a new analysis that challenge currently accepted empirical findings
6. Interdisciplinary analysis: using the tools of two or more disciplines to reach new theoretical or empirical insights
7. Comparison: using the variation across two or more cases to challenge accepted empirical claims or generate more general conclusions
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

Some Possible Types of Constructive Feedback on Other Peoples' Papers

You should consult this list before you start preparing your feedback, but feel free to identify other types of comments.

- 1) Suggest how the author might *clarify or sharpen* the thesis, type of intervention, etc.
- 2) Suggest ways the author might reorganize the paper to make the thesis/intervention clearer. (Hint: you might imagine how the paper would read if it were to start with the conclusion)
- 3) Offer objections that are likely to be raised to the paper and suggest responses.
- 4) Propose the consideration of related literature that might offer further theoretical or methodological insight or that might be good models for the paper. Be specific and work within the author's chosen method/approach.
- 5) Consider ways that the author might sharpen the paper's method
 - a. Is the author reaching macro conclusions from micro analysis? The reverse?
 - b. Is the author making causal claims on the basis of cross-sectional data?
 - c. Is the author relying on unexamined assumptions?
 - d. Are the findings driven by the cases chosen?
 - e. Are there unexamined likely alternative explanations for the conclusions offered?
 - f. Might the author's own analysis lead to a different conclusion?
 - g. More broadly, are the methods appropriate to the question/data?

- 6) _____
- 7) _____
- 8) _____
- 9) _____
- 10) _____
- 11) _____

Less Helpful Types of Feedback

It is usually less helpful to:

- 1) Suggest that the author take a totally different theoretical/political approach (such as the one you might take) to the issue she or he is addressing
- 2) Propose an entirely new field or literature that the author needs to know before continuing with her or his project (unless it is directly implicated and clearly overlooked)
- 3) Propose a different/more interesting question the author could answer
- 4) _____
- 5) _____
- 6) _____